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A WORKING PLAN FOR CONFERENCE PERIODS

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According to the wise Lord Verulam, "reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man." We English teachers, throwing our energies into the reading and the writing, have forgotten that the conference is the mean between the two extremes. We have omitted the conference; and the result is that our high-school graduate is too often an Athelstane the Un-ready.

During five semesters the following plan for conferences has been in operation here. The results have been so satisfactory that the twenty teachers of English who have participated in it vote unanimously for its continuance. A few also suggest improvements which, if possible to make, will certainly increase its efficiency.

Practically all of our students take three years of English, and 85 per cent of the Seniors accomplish four years. Senior students recite three days a week to the regular English teacher and two days a week to the special teacher of oral expression. Teachers of three Senior classes and two other classes teach, therefore, nineteen hours a week. Teachers who have no Senior classes teach but four sections, or twenty hours a week. A day for all pupils and teachers of all departments consists of six regular periods and a shorter seventh period for conference work in all departments. As English teachers hold classes but four of the six periods, one regular hour is set aside for teaching in conference. The other period the teacher is one of four to be on duty in a large study hall. These teachers enter into an agreement whereby one or two are relieved in rotation. Each of the twenty teachers of English, therefore, has for conference one period of 45 minutes daily, another of 30 minutes daily, and another of 45 minutes daily on alternate weeks (in a few cases only every fourth week). The average daily conference time is therefore over 85 minutes. Many teachers come early, thus gaining additional time; others stay late for the same purpose.

Although the present plan was not originally designed to lessen the work of the English teacher in reading manuscript, it accomplishes this to a limited extent. The eighteen teachers who have only English classes report that aside from manuscript reading in conference they use 164 hours a week reading manuscript, an average of 9 hours a week. This is a reduction of but one hour from former times.

Since this plan was not originated to reduce the time given to manuscript reading, it must have been intended to increase the quality of the English product. The manner of this is fairly well expressed in the name given to the period—the conference hour. When we began this work we agreed that the time thus gained by reducing the number of classes to the teacher should be used not merely for conference on written work, but for drill in reading aloud, for oral compositions, for theme planning, for private instruction and drill where most needed, for getting acquainted and discussing home conditions or other causes of failure—for anything, in short, that would be best for the individual. The following work is actually carried on, according to excerpts from reports made this week by every teacher in the corps:

“Here I teach the mechanics of the thing—form, structure, paragraphing, spelling, grammar, etc.”

“What I do during the conference hour depends upon the individual theme. If it is carelessly done, I sometimes make the pupil correct it before I will talk it over with him. When he has done his best, we do the remainder of the work together. Here method depends upon the nature of the errors. If the error is such that the pupil should detect it, I say, ‘There is an error in that line; find it’; or, ‘There is a misspelled word in that line; there is a capital incorrectly used; that sentence is not correctly punctuated; that page is not correctly paragraphed.’ If the error is less obvious, such as an error in organization, I sometimes tell what the error is and show why it is an error. Sometimes I can point out the error best by questioning the pupil and building up from what he knows. If there is a recurring error, the pupil gets a special lesson on that.”

“I occasionally give lessons in grammar to those who are weak there. I have taken time, too, when circumstances seemed to require it, to talk over the work in general with a student, showing him just how to proceed to accomplish it. The result has been sometimes a complete transformation in the pupil.”

"During conference I supervise correction of themes; discuss difficulties in that or the other class work; hear recitations or work missed by reason of absence; answer questions about advanced work; investigate causes of failure; hear reports on home reading; make individual assignments for particular weaknesses; and occasionally I have assisted in planning a college course."

"All themes, exercises, and tests are gone over, the good pointed out, errors checked, and individual excellences commended."

"I also use this occasion to talk over with the student his English work in general—class work, speech, time put on work, strong points, weaknesses."

Other teachers repeat in other terms the thoughts expressed in these extracts. Now let us examine the results as reported. The quotations are from the same papers:

"The conference hour has enabled me to establish a habit of work in pupils who did not seem able of themselves to work."

"In the conferences I have driven home the mechanics of the writing trade more effectively than in any other way. I use the class time for inspiration, the conference hour for technique."

"The pupils respond to the touch of personal interest that the conference reveals. They are being treated as individual John or Susan; that is different from being taught as part of a class. They respond by doing better work in literature—personal interest again. They feel more friendly toward the teacher and show it in consulting her more freely upon many phases of the work."

"The conference period has decidedly raised the standard of theme work."

"The pupils to whom individual help in class is given become embarrassed, bewildered, and sometimes feel humiliated. They will not disclose their real difficulties if they can help it. Some prefer failure to an attempt to improve upon a mistake. All this vanishes in conference. Indeed, pupils respond as soon as they feel that anyone is interested in their individual efforts. In the case of weak pupils the effects of a conference can frequently be traced in a toning up of their work for two or three weeks afterward. I do not doubt that conferences mean just as much to strong pupils, though results may not be so obvious."

"The correction of his own mistakes is apparently beyond the power of a certain type of high-school pupil. He will not do it thoroughly without some direct supervision and occasional aid. I do not see how this can be had otherwise than by conferences."

"If there were no conference periods, much of my time spent in marking errors on papers would be wasted, for I could not make sure that these were corrected."

"The conference has a value to both teacher and pupil that entirely outweighs any disadvantages. The pupil receives a clearer understanding of the mistakes and the way to remedy them. The teacher becomes better acquainted and is more capable of helping her pupils. With the live writers of the themes

right beside her, she easily concentrates her thoughts upon the papers, and instead of eternally forcing and driving her mind, she easily and naturally turns her attention to the work before her and the personality of the pupil at her side."

"The differences between a theme corrected after conference and a theme corrected alone is strikingly noticeable."

"The conference hour is worth much more than the class period, because English is a subject so personal that only individual help can make it clear and effective. There are so many phases of English work that students in the same class and doing work of about the same grade will have wholly different sets of difficulties. Such conditions can be met only by personal help."

There are a few weaknesses in the plan. To be able to get a pupil for conference the teacher must see that he is scheduled for the study hall at the conference hour. Now, as there are only six periods a day, and as many pupils take commercial subjects, home economics, science, or manual training, all of which are double-period subjects, it often happens that the pupil has no study-hall period all day long. A conference is therefore impossible till the seventh, or short period, which is not altogether satisfactory. Some teachers find that a large number of their pupils, usually the weakest, can come for conference only in the seventh period, which some are prone to regard as being "kept after school." We can nearly always get students from the classical, history, and modern-language courses for conference; but, again, they are usually the pupils who need the conference least. Another seeming weakness is that the number in our classes is slightly increased; that is, in some cases to about 28; but, to offset this, the total number assigned to each teacher is slightly decreased, to about 110.

The valuable results of this conference work are not all apparent immediately. At first the teacher may feel that her chief business is the inglorious fight against such illiteracy as that with which a certain innocent Freshman mystified his study-hall teacher when he notified her that he had "gone to rume 109 for comforts." Yet very soon in this "comforts" work the teacher may find the joy of giving valuable help to the strongest students. It may be that in the end we shall find that such conferences are among the best remedies for the injustice which our present system works upon those strong students who are held back to the pace of the class.